DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 760 CS 213 042

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TITLE Half Sinful Words: Disguised Grief in "Ulysses."
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (San Antonio, TX, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; *English Literature; Figurative Language; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; *Poetry; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS Tennyson (Alfred); *Ulysses (Tennyson); Words

ABSTRACT

As a shrewd technician of the language, A. L. Tennyson rightly understood that words are not controllable; they do not always obey rules. As Tennyson said, words "half reveal and half conceal the soul within." In "Ulysses," the title character's speech to his fellow mariners--where he attempts to explain why he has decided to abandon domestic life and why they should accompany him on a last heroic quest--forms an extended demonstration of Tennyson's concern with the disobedient nature of words. It is Ulysses' unwillingness to acknowledge the end of his heroic self that shapes the "large grief" which he attempts to disguise beneath the words to his mariners. Ulysses uses words to comfort and lull not only his mariners but himself as well, to ease all minds about the hard decision he has made and to persuade all that his choice to leave is correct. But regardless of their lulling effect, his words are uncooperative; they only half obey Ulysses' wishes. He struggles with words, self knowledge, and his knowledge of the world, attributing a boundlessness to all knowledge, and thus complicating the mosaic-like structure of his self-understanding. Although Ulysses claims that humankind must move through an arch of experience to reach towards the light of knowledge, suggesting that the direction to move is out to sea, the proper direction for him might actually be toward Ithaca and domestic life. In "Ulysses" Tennyson shows how an individual braves the struggle of life. And the protagonist's words of revelation-concealment draw reader and student toward the discovery which is the main quest of the poem. (PRA)

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Half Sinful Words: Disguised Grief in "Ulysses"

by Michael Hobbs, University of North Texas

In section five of "In Memoriam," Tennyson claims that there is something half sinful about using words to express an emotion: "I sometimes hold it half a sin/To put in words the grief I feel" (V.1-2). As a shrewd technician of the language, Tennyson rightly understands that words are not always controllable; they do not always obey rules. Once on paper or out of our mouths, words become potentially dangerous, subverting our plans, revealing too much about us, concealing our intended meanings, both stripping of disguises and disguising at the same time; as Tennyson says, words "half reveal / and half conceal the Soul within" (V.3-4). In "Ulysses," the title character's speech to his fellow mariners forms an extended demonstration of Tennyson's concern with the disobedient nature of words. Ulysses is caught in a no man's land between the heroic and the domestic, a position Tennyson subtly formulates by placing his hero on the ocean shore, that sandy margin which is neither land nor sea. From this awkward, shifting, uncertain ground, Ulysses attempts to explain to his mariners why he has decided to abandon the domestic life and why they should accompany him on a last heroic quest. As the poem progresses, we begin to see that Ulysses is attempting to explain his decision not only to his mariners but to himself as well. His resolution to depart seems tenuous at best, and in fact at times his words reveal a well disguised but deeply felt desire to remain in Ithaca and serve dutifully as king, husband, and father. For Ulysses, yielding to this desire for a life in Ithaca means acknowledging the death of his heroic self. On the other hand, by returning to the sea he hopes to revive the once young hero, a self which he at least suspects is already dead. It is Ulysses' unwillingness to acknowledge the end of his heroic self that shapes the "large grief" (In Memoriam V.11) which he attempts to disguise beneath the words to his mariners.

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Tennyson tells us, in section five of "In Memoriam," that words are of great use in quieting the lamentation over death:

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
A use in measured language lies;
The sad mechanic exercise,
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain. (V.4-8)

Ulysses uses words in just such a way; he attempts to comfort and lull not only his mariners but himself as well, to ease all minds about the tough decision he has made and to persuade all that his choice to leave is correct. But regardless of their lulling effect, his words are uncooperative; they only half obey Ulysses' wishes.

Ulysses' struggle with words begins early in the poem when he says "I cannot rest from travel" (6). The line hints at a rather vacillating tone in the hero's voice. Even if we understand the statement as Ulysses undoubtedly means it--that is, that he refuses to cease pursuing a heroic life at sea--the words hardly paint a portrait of a powerful leader exhorting his men to follow a difficult order. Instead, the statement is self-absorbed and uncertain. But to make matters worse, the sentence suggests another meaning: I cannot <u>rest</u> because I have traveled too much. Undoubtedly, Ulysses wants to conceal this second meaning, for it implies that he is somehow weak, even exhausted, or that he is uncontrollably obsessed with the need to travel. His words become almost a plea for rest, while his restless, travel-weary, travel-hungry soul demands to move on.

The ambiguity of "I cannot rest from travel" qualifies significantly Ulysses' earlier words about Ithaca, his people, his wife and home, and even himself. The indicting phrases at the beginning of "Ulysses" are hardly what the reader expects from a newly returned husband, father, and ruler. But upon

subsequent readings of the poem, we begin to suspect that Ulysses' first words are greatly overstated, the exaggeration necessary in order to conceal uncertainty and weakness. Words like idle king, still hearth, barren crags, aged wife, unequal laws, and savage race, all uttered in a near-ranting fashion, help Ulysses to conceal--from himself as well as his audience--his exhaustion and the desire, which at least a part of him feels, to do exactly what he most condemns in his people, that is, to "hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me" (5). Avoiding knowledge of himself is especially important for Ulysses, since such knowledge might entail finally realizing that his heroic self is dead.

The subject of self-knowledge occurs early in the poem when Ulysses begins to relate his history of war and wandering. The tone of this section has an almost eulogizing effect:

> All times I have enjoy'd
> Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
> That loved me, and alone: on shore, and when
> Thro' scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
> Vext the dim sea. I am become a name. . . . (7-11)

The last phrase is especially telling, and echoes the hero's accusation that his own people do not know him, a man who is a living legend. But again the words have an unpredictable effect. They remind us that, basically, Ulysses identity is made up of a mosaic of legends. He is famous both as war hero and as statesman:

> Much have I seen and known,--cities of men
> And manners, climates, councils, governments,
> Myself not least, but honor'd of them all,--
> And drunk delight of battle with my peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy. (13-17)

But within this assemblage of fragmentary tales, where is the real Ulysses, the essence or soul of the hero? Does he himself know his own identity? The very claim that he has become a name -- that is, a word or collection of words -- throws much into doubt, especially given the problematic nature of words in their half revealing, half concealing role.

Ulysses' comments about his knowledge of the world are as problematic as his remarks about self-knowledge. He attributes a boundlessness to all knowledge, and thus complicates the mosaic-like structure of his self-understanding:

I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move. (18-21)

Ulysses speaks of the limit of knowledge as if it were a mirage, always fading as one draws on toward its horizon. He means, of course, to place all emphasis on the quest for knowledge, instead of on any goal ultimately obtained. But the illusory nature of limitation -- boundaries as mirages -- half suggests that the very knowledge after which Ulysses wishes to quest is itself illusory, unapproachable. Boundaries, after all, help define what they encompass; if they are illusory, that which they enclose may be equally so. But the uncooperative nature of the mirage metaphor is less dangerous to Ulysses' argument than the more subtle ambiguity associated with his concept of the arch of experience. Ulysses claims that humankind must move through an arch of experience to reach towards the light of knowledge. He would have us believe that the proper direction of movement is outwards, that the gleam of understanding lies outside. But whether the light of knowledge shines from

inside or from outside is never really made clear. Indeed, the proper direction for Ulysses may be in toward Ithaca and domestic life instead of out toward the sea.

More than he will acknowledge and perhaps more than he even understands, Ulysses desires to move inside, towards Ithaca. He conceals this by emphasizing the importance of outer surfaces: "How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!" The shininess of an outward appearance is all important. Section five of "In Memoriam" offers an interesting commentary on this outward brilliance so essential to Ulysses. In this early section of the elegy, words are compared to funeral garments: "In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,/Like coarsest clothes against the cold" (9-10). Here, as in "Ulysses," Tennyson seems to emphasize an outer surface; the funeral garb will offer warmth against the cold. But for Tennyson, suffering over the loss of Hallam, the cold exists within as well as without, and his mourning clothes not only protect against outside cold but lie against the cold within, both protecting the mourner from his revealing too much of his "large grief," and also, ironically, closing that grief inside. The problem is that words can neither entirely communicate grief nor entirely keep it inside. They are somehow defective both in their revelation and in their concealment.

Ulysses' impulse in the poem is to move beyond all limits and boundaries, "to follow knowledge like a sinking star,/Beyond the utmost bound of human thought" (31-32). Storing and hoarding, which Ulysses condemns in the Ithacans, requires containers and limits, and is thus to be spurned. But again the disobedient nature of words undermines Ulysses' intentions. The poem's container imagery, with its play on insides and outsides, often serves to qualify Ulysses' exaggerated condemnation of hoarding and storing. Ironically the impulse to store and hoard is strong in Ulysses himself. For instance,

lines 24-32 seem to support Ulysses' vilification of storing and hoarding, but again his words will not cooperate:

> Life piled on life
> Were all too little, and of one to me
> Little remains; but every hour is saved
> From that eternal silence, something more,
> A bringer of new things; and vile it were
> For some three suns to store and hoard myself,
> And this gray spirit yearning in desire
> To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
> Beyond the utmost bound of human thought. (24-32)

Ulysses implies that the piling of life on life--a sort of neatly stacked and stored existence--is a petty thing, "all too little" (25). But the wording suggests another meaning as well, namely that even several lives packed together in one will not be enough for Ulysses who now has only a small amount of one life left to him: "of one to me/little remains" (25-26). Beneath his disgust at the domestic impulse to hoard and store, Ulysses strongly desires to save as much of the remainder of his life as possible. The syntax of lines 26-28 is difficult. Perhaps the best possible paraphrase is this: during every hour, each of which is a bringer of new things, something more is saved from that eternal silence. Ulysses wants us to understand that something of life can be <u>rescued</u> from death, "that eternal silence," but the arrangement of the words undermines Ulysses' intended meaning. When he says "every hour is saved" (26), his meaning becomes tainted with the domestic impulse to store and hoard, as if he desires to save up the remainder of life against the last hour before death, something which Ulysses patently scorns in the next line or so: "vile it were/For some three suns to store and hoard myself" (28-29). Ulysses' words

betray him both to his audience and to himself; the thing he most scorns with one part of himself he most desires with another, and it is exactly for this reason that he must emphasize in such exaggerated language--"vile it were"--the need to avoid storing away the self.

Packed and stored neatly between the two long stanzas which focus on Ulysses is the shorter stanza in which Ulysses presents Telemachus as the new ruler of Ithaca. Here Ulysses seems most to remove his heroic mask and reveal the domestic yearnings which are tempting and torturing him. In fact, he projects a domestic version of himself onto his son. Telemachus becomes a receptacle for all the domestic trappings which Ulysses is attempting to leave behind, as if the father were storing away his belongings, preserving a bit of himself in the role he assigns his son. The terms that Ulysses uses to describe Ithaca and the domestic duties of a ruler are much softened from the original scorn heard in the opening of the poem and reveal how Ulysses' domestic self feels about his country, wife, and son. Note, for example, the contrast between "rugged people" (37) and the earlier epithet "savage race" (4). The former expresses a characteristic which Ulysses admires, whereas the latter implies his disgust at their vicious barbarism. Also, Telemachus is "well-loved," "blameless," "decent not to fail/In offices of tenderness," whereas earlier, Penelope is simply an "aged wife" with whom Ulysses is "match'd." In addition, Ulysses' recognition of Telemachus' care and piety, and his "tenderness" towards Penelope, suggests that Ulysses' own similar feelings are still alive.

The abruptness with which Ulysses suddenly ends this almost rhapsodic stanza perhaps best indicates Ulysses' vacillating mood. After he has praised Telemachus for the domestic duties which he has so thoroughly scorned early in the poem, he suddenly stops as if he has let himself wander too far from the

subject of his return to the sea: "He works his work, I mine" (43). This curt reining in of his digressive mood makes the entire passage ironic. Thus language plays another trick on Ulysses, concealing the most intense and exposed emotions of the poem beneath a perhaps unintended sarcasm.

The opening of the final stanza is very ironic at the expense of Ulysses: "There lies the port;/the vessel puffs her sail" (44). This self-puffing sailboat becomes an almost comic emblem of Ulysses using his ineffectual rhetoric to energize an otherwise unmoving and unmotivated expedition. But there is an even deeper vein of irony buried in the word "vessel" which calls to mind not only a sailing ship but also a type of container for storage. The ship itself is a place to hide away what remains of the heroic self, and indeed the vessel begins to sound like a kind of floating casket where finally the dead hero will be buried: "for my purpose holds/To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths/Of all the western stars, until I die" (59-61).

The dramatic situation of the poem becomes important in the final stanza. Before his actual invitation to the mariners, Ulysses says

> The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
> the long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
> Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
> 'Tis not too late to seek a newer world. (54-57)

This passage suggests that Ulysses is facing inland toward Ithaca and the rising moon, his back to the sea and the setting sun, his figure silhouetted against the final light of the sun, a dark, somewhat shadowy leader addressing his men. Thus, Ulysses is commenting on the appearance of domestic lights inland, the hearths and lamps newly fired as the sun disappears into the sea. The verb "twinkle" sounds soft and playful and echoes the softer tones of the second stanza where Ulysses allows himself to digress on the domestic duties of

Telemachus. Here again we can detect a powerful pull on Ulysses, not outward to the sea and heroism but inward toward the ease of a more domestic life.

The most significant aspect of this passage relies on Ulysses' association with the images of the sun and moon. Ulysses' speech comes at a threshold moment in his life, and the shift from his association with the sun towards an association with the moon and the inland lights of Ithaca suggests the death of the heroic self and the birth of a new, domestic self. Yet even though this new self is associated with the moon, it is not simply a pale reflection of the old but also a fresh firing as of the domestic hearths which Ulysses claims are unlighted at the beginning of the poem. In fact the sea, the setting of the sun, Ulysses' dark figure encased, as it were, in the final moments of the sunset, all these become rather emblematic of the heroic self's death. On the other hand the phrase "that which we are, we are" (67) hints at Ulysses' new connection with the moon. Specifically, the words echo themselves, reflect themselves, much as the moon reflects the light cast on it by the sun. The reflection, the second "we are," that which Ulysses is now, is not the same as the original, but nonetheless this reflected self is a part of that "never world" which Ulysses desires to find.

Ulysses' final claim is that he and his mariners must be "strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" (69-70). But exactly what to resist is left unresolved at the end of the poem--for Ulysses, for the mariners, and for the reader as well. Ostensibly, Ulysses is resisting the temptation to rest, the temptation to establish himself comfortably in his role as husband, father, and ruler. He will resist death in life by seeking life even at the peril of death. In fact Ulysses' drive becomes a sort of quest after death in order to prove the boundlessness of life, to prove that not even death can store or hoard the hero's life. The irony is that this very quest becomes a container within which the grieving Ulysses hoards his old heroic

existence. The sun against which he is silhouetted, emblematic of his containment within it, is dying and he dying with it. Ulysses' liberation lies within the new reflection of his old self, towards the moon and the newer lights of Ithaca beginning to shine as the sun, the heroic self, makes its descent into the ocean. For Ulysses, the bravest resistance will be in his refusal to yield to the grief-stricken demands of his old heroic self and its insatiable desire to go in quest of death, "the Happy Isles," and "great Achilles" (63-64). "Ulysses" was "written shortly after Arthur Hallam's death" and Tennyson claimed that the poem "gave my feeling about the need of going forward and braving the struggle of life" (32n). But which direction is the going forward and how does one brave the struggle of life? Ulysses' words "half reveal/And half conceal" (In Memoriam V.3-4) the answers to these questions, and their half revelation, half concealment draws reader, mariners, and Ulysses himself on toward a discovery of those answers, a discovery which is, after all, the main quest of the poem.

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